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Paul Giblin

During the three weeks since Harry Mitchell was sworn in as the oldest member of the freshman class in the U.S. House of Representatives, the former Tempe High School civics teacher has been learning everything he never taught his students about Washington. For example, showing up for the State of the Union address just an hour before it is scheduled to begin is way too late, the Democratic congressman learned.

Mitchell, 66, arrived in the House chamber of the Capitol on Tuesday to find that there were no reserved seats for House members. Veteran House members, however, knew to arrive early and tape their names to chairs in the front rows.

After scouring the chamber, Mitchell found an unclaimed seat in the back row.

Despite his poor vantage point, it was a terrific evening, he said. And took a mental note for next year.

"The last couple of weeks have just been a whirlwind," Mitchell told about 150 business leaders at a Tempe Chamber of Commerce luncheon at the Phoenix Zoo on Friday.

The Democrat, who unseated six-term Republican incumbent J.D. Hayworth in November, recalled that during his teaching career he showed documentaries that detailed the Washington political process.

"I saw those films sometimes five times a day for almost 28 years," Mitchell said. "Well, there are many times back there when all of a sudden, there is some flash from one of those films I was showing. To be part of what I was teaching is pretty exciting. And, I have to say, it's been a lot of fun."

Mitchell's career has taken him from Tempe High School, to Tempe City Hall, to the state Capitol and finally to the U.S. Capitol.

He's still getting used to the idea that he's actually there.

"In the last three weeks, I was sworn in, we took a number of votes, I co-sponsored some bills, I gave my first speech on the House floor, and just the other night of course, I participated in my first State of the Union address," he said.

Mitchell says he still gets lost frequently in Washington. Last week, he was invited to a breakfast meeting for all 10 members of Arizona's congressional delegation. "That was the first time I discovered the members' dining room," he said.

Earlier this week, he gained a historical perspective about the architecture of the Capitol when he needed to locate the men's room in an area reallocated to House members and other credentialed personnel.

"It's right off the speaker's lobby. I asked somebody where it was and I went in there. I said, 'Wow. This is pretty nice.' You've got to think how old the building is. There's a little fireplace in the men's room," he said.

He discovered another interesting detail - there's no women's room on the entire floor. "I have a feeling the speaker is going to change that," he said.

That would seem likely, considering Rep. Nancy Pelosi, DCalif., was just sworn in as the first woman speaker in the history of the country.

"Every day I find something different. I haven't found the gym yet, which I need to do, but there is one there," Mitchell said.

He has found a spirit of cooperation among the Democrats and Republicans, he said.

"Three months ago, the American people gave us a divided government - a Republican president and a Democratic Congress. I don't think they did that by mistake," he said. "I don't believe they did that because they wanted gridlock in Washington. We have a divided government because the people expect Republicans and Democrats to work across the aisle to get the job done."

So far, the 233 Democrats and 202 Republicans in the House are working together, he said.

They passed an ethics reform measure with 430 votes, a fiscal responsibility bill with 280 votes, a package of Sept. 11 recommendations with 299 votes, funding for embryonic stem cell research with 253 votes, and cut interest rates on student loans with 356 votes.

"We're doing what we said we would do and we're keeping our promise with the American people," he said. "I believe very strongly that we have to continue to work in this bipartisan way."

One of Mitchell's former students, Mikel Longman, said he expects Mitchell will serve in the idealized manner that he taught in civics class back in the 1970s.

"I can't imagine the congressman will change a bit," said Longman, now chief in the Criminal Investigations Division of the Arizona Department of Public Safety.

Mitchell also has opened his 5th Congressional District office at 7201 E. Camelback Road in Scottsdale. Staff members were still arranging furniture, which was recycled from Hayworth's former office, on Friday.

Mitchell said the office will retain its humble appearance. The House gives him a budget of \$1.4

million a year to staff both his Washington and Scottsdale offices, plus cover rent, equipment, supplies, travel and mail. Mitchell said he chose the location near Scottsdale Fashion Square because it is centrally located in his district, which stretches from Fountain Hills to Ahwatukee Foothills. The phone number is (480) 946-2411.